

Alexander von Humboldt's *Examen critique de l'histoire de la géographie du Nouveau Continent et des progrès de l'astronomie nautique aux quinzième et seizième siècles* (1836–1839)

A brief introduction to an excerpt from the first English version

VERA M. KUTZINSKI

¶ Alexander von Humboldt's *Examen critique* might rightly be regarded as the slightly belated crowning achievement of his writings about the Americas. Humboldt had begun his research for the *Examen critique* prior to sailing to the Americas in 1799, and he returned to it after a lengthy hiatus (see below). The text's somewhat unwieldy title—*Critical Examination of the History of the Geography of the New Continent and of the Progress of Nautical Astronomy in the 15th and 16th Centuries* in my translation—does not quite do justice to Humboldt's focus, which is, first and foremost, on Christopher Columbus. In Humboldt's own words, Columbus was remarkable in that while "subscrib[ing] to [the dogmas of] scholastic theology," he was also "endowed with an ardent and at times unruly imagination," which "unexpectedly lifted the simple and naive language of a sailor to truly inspired poetic heights."¹ Humboldt was fascinated by what he

calls the "strange combination of ideas and sentiments" Columbus embodied, "reflecting all at once, as if he were a mirror, everything sublime and bizarre that the Middle Ages had produced."² The other appeal was that Columbus erred, and erred often. The *Examen critique* is a work about errors, Columbus's and those of his contemporaries and predecessors. Most especially, it is about *productive errors*, and Humboldt's self-appointed task is to chronicle the trajectory of such errors: how they came about and were perpetuated, and what eventually came from some of them. Firmly embracing the role of an historian, Humboldt emphasized that "[i]t is the historian's responsibility to study each century according to the individual character and the distinctive traits of its intellectual movement; and I will not regret the pains of my arduous research to trace the direction of Columbus's ideas and those of his contemporaries, even if these studies are received with some

1— Alexandre de Humboldt, *Examen critique de l'histoire de la géographie du Nouveau Continent et des progrès de l'astronomie nautique aux quinzième et seizième siècles*, Vol. I (Librairie de Gide, 1836), 110. My English version follows the five-volume octavo edition of the *Examen critique* (Libraries de Gide, 1836–1839), to which the bracketed

page numbers in the translated excerpt refer. Unless otherwise indicated, any translations to the English are my own.

2— Humboldt, *Examen critique*, 110.

disdain by those who insist on a divergent *system*" (my italics).³ In fact, and perhaps surprisingly, Humboldt's own *method* as a responsible historian in the *Examen critique* does not foreground the value of empirical research found in Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment European historiography. Rather, he is willing, indeed eager, to approach historiography in a manner that is still not particularly popular even among today's academic historians: namely, by making speculation and fabulation important parts of the kind of archival research that takes seriously as historical sources the myths and legends lodged in other cultures' and societies' imaginaries.

¶₂ Alexander von Humboldt wrote the *Critical Examination* in French, as he did most of his work about the Americas. Unlike many parts of the colossal *Voyage aux régions équinoxiales du nouveau continent*, also known as *Voyage de Humboldt et Bonpland*, the *Examen critique*, was initially translated only into German (1836–1839; 1852) and much later into Spanish (1892; 1925–26; 1946 and, in excerpts, 1958).⁴ The first and only German-language translation is the impressive work of the Berlin-born and -bred classical philologist and naturalist Julius Ludwig Ideler (1809–1842), at the time a do-cent at the University of Berlin. Humboldt himself authorized Ideler's translation („mit der Bewilligung des Herrn Verfassers“).⁵ The installments of *Kritische Untersuchungen über die historische Entwicklung der geographischen Kenntnisse von der Neuen Welt und die Fortschritte der nautischen Astronomie in dem*

15ten und 16ten Jahrhundert (Berlin: Verlag der Nicolai'schen Buchhandlung), which appeared roughly at the same time as the French ones, comprised three volumes in place of Humboldt's five. The French installments ceased in 1838, effectively rendering the projected ten-volume *Examen critique* yet another one of Humboldt's unfinished works. In 1852, ten years after Ideler's death, the German publisher issued a new edition with a detailed name and subject index.⁶

¶₃ About Humboldt's unsurprising linguistic choice to write in French, at the time still the predominant language of science in Europe, Ideler remarked the following in his translator's preface: "Hätte der Herr Verfasser das Werk in seiner Muttersprache zu schreiben vorgezogen, was ihm die enge Verbindung, in der es zu den übrigen Theilen seines großen Reisewerks steht, zu thun nicht erlaubte, so dürfte das deutsche Gewand, in welchem diese *Kritischen Untersuchungen* über die geschichtliche Entwicklung der Kenntnisse von dem Festlande der Neuen Welt erscheinen, ein gänzlich verschiedenes von demjenigen sein, in welchem sie jetzt vor die Augen des Publikums treten" [Had the author preferred to write this work in his native language, which its close-knit relation to the rest of his voluminous travel writings about the Americas had not allowed him to do, the German garb in which he clad these *Critical Examinations* of the historical development of the knowledge of the continental mainland of the New World would have been entirely different from the attire in which they now stand before the

3— Humboldt, *Examen critique*, 191.

4— See Horst Fiedler und Ulrike Leitner, *Alexander von Humboldts Schriften. Bibliographie der selbstständig erschienenen Werke* (Akademie Verlag, 2000): 166–169.

5— Julius Ludwig Ideler, "Vorrede Des Uebersetzers," in *Kritische Untersuchungen über die historischen Entwicklung der geographischen Kenntnisse von der Neuen Welt und die Fortschritte der nautischen Astronomie in dem 15ten und 16ten Jahrhundert*, translated from the French by Julius Ludwg Ideler (Verlag der Nicolai'schen Buchhandlung, 1852), 23.

6— For additional information about the two editions of the *Examen critique*, and its German translation, see Fiedler and Leitner, who point out that Humboldt never wrote the "Analyse raisonnée" he had promised for a second installment of the *Atlas* that was to accompany his *Relation historique*. This *Atlas* was separately published under the title *Tableau de cartes géographiques et physiques*. Only the one-volume folio of the *Examen critique* had initially included an *Atlas*. See pages 152–153 in *Alexander von Humboldts Schriften*.

readers].⁷ At the same time as readily laying claim to translational fidelity—“[d]ie Uebersetzung, ..., darf auf Treue Anspruch machen”—Ideler also reminded his readers of the difficulty of rendering Humboldt's writing in German: “wie viel dazu gehört, die Redeweise, welche in dem Werke eines klassischen französischen Schriftstellers vorherrschen muss, in deutscher Sprache wiederzugeben.”⁸ It is worth noting that Ideler, who situated Humboldt among the “classical French authors,” regarded it as his goal to use translation to turn Humboldt's work into the intellectual “property” of “German national literature” (“dieses Werk durch eine Uebertragung zu einem Eigenthume der deutschen Nationallitteratur zu machen”), thereby making it the subject of the evolving discipline of *Germanistik*, German Studies.⁹ Admittedly, this was a tall order on several counts, but one hardly unexpected in the context of the translation boom that started in the mid-nineteenth century. In the Enlightenment literary marketplace, German became a “major host language for new [literary and scientific] translations.”¹⁰ One might say that Ideler proved equal to his self-appointed challenge in that his eloquence rivalled, and at times even exceeded,

7— Ideler, “Vorrede,” 23. See Michael D. Gordin, *Scientific Babel: How Science Was Done Before and After Global English* (University of Chicago Press, 2015). English and German were on the ascent and, in the 1850s, became what Gordin calls the “triumvirate of languages” that displaced Latin as the so-called universal language of science.

8— Ideler, “Vorrede,” 22–23.

9— Ideler, “Vorrede,” 20.

10— See Fania Oz-Salzberger, “The Enlightenment in Translation: Regional and European Aspects,” *European Review of History: Revue Européenne d'histoire* 13, no. 3 (September 2006): 388. See also Stefanie Stockhorst, ed. *Cultural Transfer through Translation: The Circulation of Enlightened Thought in Europe by Means of Translation* (Rodopi, 2010). Ideler was known particularly for his work on Coptic and Egyptian languages, and he could not resist contributing footnotes of his own to Humboldt's comparative etymologies.

Humboldt's own. Although Ideler's aspiration to bring Humboldt's text into the fold of German national literature may not have been fully achieved during this own lifetime, it certainly laid the foundation for Ottmar Ette's stunning two-volume folio edition marketed under the title *Die Entdeckung der Neuen Welt*.¹¹

¶4 What, then, of Alexander von Humboldt's own purpose with the *Examen critique*? Although incomplete, as his *Relation historique*, the fourth and final volume of Humboldt's *Personal Narrative* that he still expected to write in 1834 but never would, the *Examen critique* is a continuation of his writings about the Americas, deferred as this work was by his move from Paris to Berlin, and his Russian travels. “Since my travels in North Asia and to the Caspian Sea, I have neglected the extensive work I had planned about the history of geography in the two Americas.”¹² At the time, Humboldt still described his projected five-volume work as “a textual complement to [his] second collection of maps, the *Atlas géographique et physique*,” that is, another “Analyse raisonnée” of the sort with which he had prefaced his two *Political Essays* on Cuba and New Spain.¹³ But this is not exactly what it turned out to be. It is also clear, however, that his interests had shifted away from the preoccupation with the minutiae of geo-astronomical research and with cartographic accuracy on such full display in earlier works: notably, the lengthy “Reasoned Analysis of the Atlas of New Spain” that prefaced his *Essai politique sur le royaume de la Nouvelle Espagne* (1810, rev. 1825–1827) and its shorter counterpart, the “Reasoned Anal-

11— The first volume is entitled *Kritische Untersuchung zur historischen Entwicklung der geographischen Kenntnisse von der Neuen Welt und den Fortschritten der nautischen Astronomie im 15. und 16. Jahrhundert*. (Insel Verlag, 2009). Ette's edition offers a corrected version of Ideler's translation, in which smaller passages that had been omitted were added back in.

12— Humboldt, *Examen critique*, ix.

13— Humboldt, *Examen critique*, xxi.

ysis of the Map of the Island of Cuba” in his *Essai politique sur l'île de Cuba* [Political Essay on the Island of Cuba] (1825–1826). There are also the many other maps Humboldt discusses and references in his Cuba-Essay, only some of which were included in the first Atlas.¹⁴ Taken together, these maps also form what Ette, with respect to the collection of 62 world maps Humboldt mentions in the *Examen critique*, called an “Unsichtbarer Atlas” (Invisible Atlas).¹⁵

¶5 While Humboldt's lifelong cartographic passions had by no means faded fully by the mid-1830s, the *Critical Examination* is a work that metamorphosed into something rather different from what Humboldt himself had anticipated: It grew much more ambitious (projected were no fewer than 10 volumes) and it went well beyond even a thorough explication of maps. That Humboldt dedicated the *Examen critique* to the French mathematician, physicist, and astronomer François Arago, with whom he had close contact throughout his career, indicates how important it still was to the Prussian to be recognized as part of the network of French natural scientists and philosophers after his 1827 departure from Paris, where he had lived and worked since his return from the Americas in 1804. The other community into which Humboldt inscribes himself in the *Examen critique* is that of previous generations of seafarers and ingenious mapmakers from different parts of the globe, a community much larger and farther flung than the one we encounter in his other works on the

14— These maps are often difficult to identify. Most of them are listed in a separate section of “Humboldt's Library” in *Political Essay on the Island of Cuba. A Critical Edition*, ed. by Vera M. Kutzinski and Ottmar Ette, transl. by J. Bradford Anderson et al. (University of Chicago Press, 2011), 454–459.

15— The “Invisible Atlas” is part of the 2009 German edition of the second volume of Ette's edited version of *Kritische Untersuchung, Geographischer und physischer Atlas der Äquinoktial-Gegenden des Neuen Kontinents: Unsichtbarer Atlas* (Insel Verlag, 2009).

Americas. This scientific and philosophical network dates to well before Christopher Columbus, whose legacy Humboldt examines and to which he himself lays claim, albeit as the one able to point out fundamental errors. Humboldt had begun this research while in Spain, waiting to depart for the Spanish colonies, and he resumed it from afar. Like Columbus, then, he started in Spain and returned to it, even if not in person. For the Prussian who (via his mother's name) would have been Alejandro de Humboldt y Colomb had he been a Spaniard, writing about Cristobal Colón meant both following and reimagining that man, along with himself. Such reimagining did not, however, change Humboldt's critical views of Spanish colonialism, be it with respect to slavery in Cuba or the maltreatment of Indigenous laborers in Mexico, about which Humboldt did not mince his words in his *Essai politique sur le royaume de la Nouvelle-Espagne* [Political Essay on the Kingdom of New Spain].¹⁶

¶6 In the *Examen critique*, Humboldt returns to and broadens the role of “historian of the Americas” he had self-consciously embraced in his *Political Essay on the Island of Cuba* just prior to a partly historical account of transatlantic slavery that would become the object of considerable controversy.¹⁷

16— Vera M. Kutzinski and Ottmar Ette, “All the Bumps in the Road: Alexander von Humboldt's Mexican Tableau,” in *Political Essay on the Kingdom of New Spain*. ed. by Vera M. Kutzinski and Ottmar Ette, original French by Alexander von Humboldt, transl. by J. Ryan Poynter et. al. (University of Chicago Press, 2019), Vol. I, xxv.

17— Humboldt, *Political Essay on the Island of Cuba*, 142. It is worth noting in this context that François Arago, while serving as Minister of War and the Navy during the 1848 French Revolution, played an instrumental role in the abolition of slavery in the French colonies. See for instance, Bart Kahr and Oreol Artega, “Arago's best paper,” *ChemPhysChem* 13, no. 1 (2012): 79–88. See also Kutzinski, “Translations of Cuba: Fernando Ortiz, Alexander von Humboldt, and the curious case of John Sidney Thrasher,” *Atlantic Studies* 6, no. 3 (2009): 303–326.

Humboldt's work within the extensive archives surrounding the iconic figure of Christopher Columbus and his examination of the debates the Admiral inspired defines his stance as that of an historian of the world, a witness of global natural and historical processes more akin to the role he embraced in *Kosmos*.¹⁸ In the *Critical Examination*, Humboldt proposes to place "new facts alongside older, perhaps familiar ones," arranging them in "combinations [that] suggest new insights" (my italics).¹⁹ Those "older, perhaps familiar" facts include the varied myths and legends that had inspired and accompanied all early seafarers, including of course Columbus. Humboldt's approach to witnessing and writing history is characterized by frequent shifts between Romantic and Enlightenment modes and methods: There is a productive tension between his willingness to amalgamate fact with fiction on the one hand and his unshakable, though now backgrounded, belief in the value of direct observation and measurements on the other. It is a productive tension in that Humboldt, unlike later historians, is less interested in disentangling presumed facts from supposed fictions. Rather, by treating both as products of the imagination, he shows the processes by which erstwhile facts turned into later fictions. What were facts to earlier seafarers and cosmologists became myths to later ones, and vice-versa.

¶7 Christopher Columbus's own words, a heavily mediated space where fact and fiction often fuse, are a case in point. Even while quoting what may remain of the words written by Columbus himself, Humboldt is well aware that the only access to the Admiral's words was through a supposed transcription of the lost original manuscript of Columbus's *Diario*, the so-called "Abstract" by Bartolomé de las Casas, and through Diego Co-

lumbus's biography of his father. When Humboldt, in one of his copious footnotes in the *Examen critique*, remarks on the "sheer difficulty of rendering with dignity the true energy and power of the old idiom of a man who, with much modesty, calls himself *lego marinero, non doto en letras y hombre mundanal* [a humble seafarer without any higher education and a worldly man]," he implicitly reminds readers, then and now, that apprehending Columbus's intelligence, spirit, and, yes, his limits, is ultimately impossible without fabrication.²⁰

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Fiedler, Horst and Ulrike Leitner, *Alexander von Humboldts Schriften. Bibliographie der selbstständig erschienenen Werke*. Akademie Verlag, 2000.
- Gordin, Michael D. *Scientific Babel: How Science Was Done Before and After Global English*. University of Chicago Press, 2015.
- Humboldt, Alexandre de. *Examen critique de l'histoire de la géographie du Nouveau Continent et des progrès de l'astronomie nautique aux quinzième et seizième siècles*. Gide, 1836.
- Humboldt, Alexander von. *Political Essay on the Island of Cuba: A Critical Edition*. Edited by Vera M. Kutzinski and Ottmar Ette, translated by J. Bradford Anderson, Vera Kutzinski and Anja Becker. University of Chicago Press, 2011.
- Humboldt, Alexander von. *Political Essay on the Kingdom of New Spain, Volume 1: A Critical Edition*. Edited by Vera M. Kutzinski and Ottmar Ette, translated by J. Ryan Poynter, Kenneth Berri and Vera M. Kutzinski. University of Chicago Press, 2019.
- Humboldt, Alexander von. *Kritische Untersuchungen zur historischen Entwicklung der geographischen Kenntnisse von der Neuen Welt und den Fortschritten der nautischen Astronomie im 15. Und*
- 20— Humboldt, *Examen critique*, 30, footnote 2.

18— Those records would become the foundation of the field of Spanish Golden Age studies.

19— Humboldt, xxii.

16. *Jahrhundert*. Nach der Übersetzung aus dem Französischen von Julius Ludwig Ideler editiert und mit einem Nachwort versehen von Ottmar Ette. 2 Bände. [Based on Julius Ludwig Ideler's translation from the French, edited and with an afterword by Ottmar Ette. Two volumes.] Insel, 2009.

Ideler, Julius Ludwig. "Vorrede Des Uebersetzers." In *Kritische Untersuchungen über die historische Entwicklung der geographischen Kenntnisse von der Neuen Welt und die Fortschritte der nautischen Astronomie in dem 15ten und 16ten Jahrhundert. Erster Band*. Nicolai'sche Buchhandlung, 1852.

Kahr, Bart, and Oriol Arteaga. "Arago's Best Paper." *Chemphyschem: A European Journal of Chemical Physics and Physical Chemistry* 13, no. 1 (2012): 79–88. <https://doi.org/10.1002/cphc.201100660>.

Kutzinski, Vera M. and Ottmar Ette. "All the Bumps in the Road: Alexander von Humboldt's Mexican Tableau." In *Political Essay on the Kingdom of New Spain, Volume 1: A Critical Edition*. Edited by Vera M. Kutzinski and Ottmar Ette, translated by J. Ryan Poynter, Kenneth Berri and Vera M. Kutzinski. University of Chicago Press, 2019.

Kutzinski, Vera M. "Translations of Cuba: Fernando Ortiz, Alexander von Humboldt, and the Curious Case of John Sidney Thrasher." *Atlantic Studies* 6, no. 3 (December 2009): 303–26. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14788810903264779>.

Oz-Salzberger, Fania. "The Enlightenment in Translation: Regional and European Aspects." *European Review of History: Revue Européenne d'histoire* 13, no. 3 (September 2006): 385–409. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13507480600893122>.

Stockhorst, Stefanie, ed. *Cultural Transfer through Translation: The Circulation of Enlightened Thought in Europe by Means of Translation*. Rodopi, 2010.